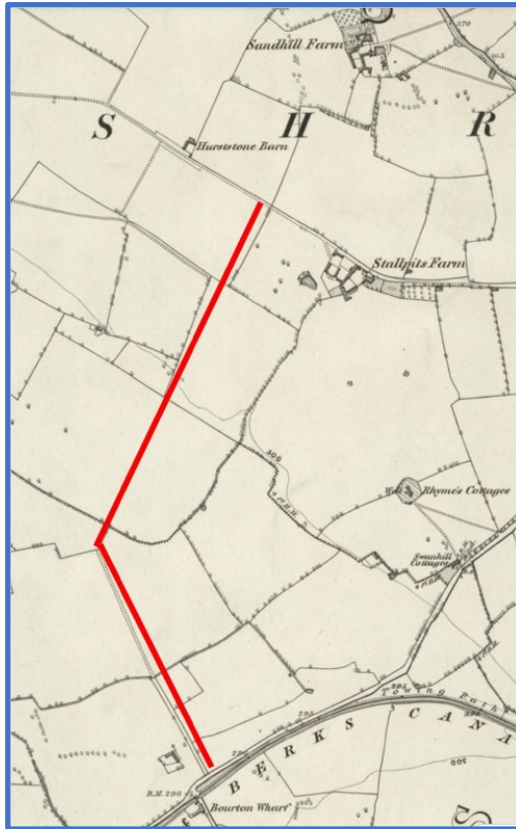


# Sandhill Farm, Shrivenham – the Old Rectory Manor Farm

By Neil B. Maw

A recent discovery (February 2024) at the Royal Berkshire Archives (RBA) at Reading has altered the historical record of Sandhill Farm, Shrivenham, significantly. Sometimes new or forgotten information written within original documents can be contained within one sentence. This was the case with an Indenture stored within the Pleydell Estate collection. One of the principal Manors of Shrivenham was known as Rectory Manor. Unlike the Manors of Stallpits, Salop and Beckett, it wasn't known where the seat of Rectory was located – until now. (BCA - D/EPB/T49). It was dated 9<sup>th</sup> September 1726 and the transaction being recorded was between Mark Pleydell of Coleshill Esq, and John Benwell of Shrivenham, Maltster. He farm let to him, *'All that the Manor and Site of the Manor of the Rectory of Shrivenham together with all the Buildings, Barns, Stables, Dovehouse, Orchard and other appurtenances.'* The description goes on to include the *'enclosed ground called Hackronway Longhedge and one mead called Westmead and one pasture ground called Yellow Butts.'* The ground called Hackronway Longhedge is puzzling and suggests a road or driftway from the area of Sandhill Farm towards present day Acorn Bridge (Historical Hackron). There is no road there today but the Hundred Map of 1768 shows that there was one then (BCA D/EX52/M1). (Map extracts below).





The road shown on the Hundred Map does not exist today and only came about in the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century to provide access to the fields in the extreme west of the parish but continued down the slope to join the Swindon road. We have evidence of this from the enclosure document of 1658 *'There are driftways to be allowed which are not yet set forth'* (See SHS N825 Transcription Page 9).

A Survey book of the Pleydell Estate showed the names mentioned and clearly locates it at Sandhill. Within a list of the type of crops contained in the fields also include *'House & Home'* in one acre of ground. This evidence confirmed that the Sandhill Farm of today was once the seat of the Rectory Manor, Shrivenham. (Below both extracts from BCA - D/EPB/E158/1).



remarkably lavish memorial that is appended in the Chancel of the church, gives the same impression - that this was the end of the Pleydell era in Shrivenham.

The Enclosure document of Shrivenham in 1658 portrays a situation whereby nobody occupied a traditional farm as we would know it today (See SHS N825). Instead of a farmhouse and a multitude of fields surrounding it that made up the farm, the document reveals a system where an individual held small pieces or strips of land scattered in different parts of the parish. There is much evidence to suggest that from the Norman period, most of the land, although being part of a Manor, was widely dispersed among the tenants, and for two reasons. Firstly, it prevented any one person holding large clusters of land that could become a militia stronghold, and secondly, the land was agriculturally more evenly distributed in quality. The wording of the enclosure document of 1658 makes no reference to Rectory Manor but this is not surprising as the enclosure was brought about by John Wildman who was Lord of the Manors of Salop, Beckett and Stallpits, and moreover, some claim it was illegal.

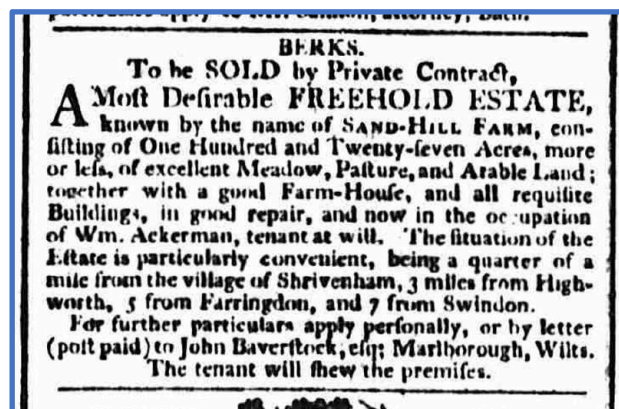
The principal house at Sandhill that still stands today, is the red brick, typical Georgian farmhouse. (Below). At the rear it clearly shows marks and scars of alterations. However, to date there has been no suggestion as to when or by whom the house was built. From the Pleydell collection we now have the answer. In a gathering of documents that were put together to form a small booklet, one of the notes next to a measurement stated, *'The measure of all the land which Mrs Stratton had adjoining to Mr Lydiard's new erected farm house at Sandhill in Shrinham.'* It's dated 1741. (BCA - D/EPB/T49).





A list contained within the Manor Rental documents held in the Berkshire County Archives, under the heading of '*The Messuages*' (Dwellings), show that Mrs Stratton occupied the earlier building that stood at Sandhill Farm before the new one erected by Mr Lydiard. (BCA D/EX52/M1).

A newspaper advertisement from the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century showed that Lord Radnor was wanting to sell the farm off as a freehold estate. The newspaper advertisement below makes no reference to who the seller is, but John Baverstock of Marlborough, Wilts, was likely the agent for Lord Radnor of Longford Castle in Wiltshire. However, the attempt to sell the farm was clearly unsuccessful as documents from 1808 would attest.



The beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a period of much change within the parish of Shrivenham. The Barrington Estate was still in a period of being in Trust. (1793-1814. See Beckett & The Barrington SHS N1481). The main Trustee still living was Shute Barrington, the Bishop of Durham. In 1805 the Trustees purchased the beautiful Georgian building today called Elm Tree House in the centre of Shrivenham, ending a 15-year legal wrangle. (See SHS N943 & N920 for detail). The Trustees also acquired the Rectory Manor, that included the Rectory Farm known today as Sandhill farm. (RBA D/EPB/T4). The process used was in a similar manner to the act of enclosure brought about by the government in the 1790s. It was a mixture of land swapping and payment. The assessments and valuations were carried out by two gentlemen known as commissioners or arbitrators. They were assisted by two surveyors for the land and timber. The solicitors were John Heath of Chippenham for the Earl of Radnor and James Crowdy of Highworth for the Barrington Trustees. The schedule that included the Rectory Manor (Shrivenham House site) and the Rectory Farm (Sandhill Farm) was dated 23<sup>rd</sup> September 1808 and required the Barrington Trustees to pay the Earl of Radnor £2275. This also included the ancient responsibility for the Chancel of the church, a responsibility to keep it in good repair. (Something the Earl of Radnor had done in 1793 See SHS Listing No N1335)

Once the Rectory Manor, house & farm, was in the hands of the Barringtons, it meant that when the Trust period ended, it would feature in the day-to-day running of the estate. That day came in 1815 with the arrival of George Merryweather, who was the new Beckett Estate Steward, brought in by George Barrington, the fifth Viscount, in April 1815. Within the Letters of George Merryweather (published by SHS in 2020) there is much talk of trouble with Moses Ackerman who was tenant of the farm. The tensions between the two men built up with Merryweather giving him notice to quit, and eventually a notice to attend a court hearing was served on Ackerman. It was at that point he capitulated and agreed to leave the farm. An advertisement in 1840 provided the information that a Mr Giles was leaving, and we can only assume that he took over the farm after Moses Ackerman had been forcibly removed in 1818. But then something must have occurred that prompted extensive activity at the farm. A completely new wing was added to the east end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century farm building and created an impressive view of an Elizabethan style house facing the road. However, why it was built is not clear, and to add to the enigma, the house bears the coronet and initials of Dowager Lady Elizabeth Barrington, the widow of George Barrington the 5<sup>th</sup> Viscount. Elizabeth died in 1841 and the tablet on the new wing bears that date, so it may simply have been a memorial to her by her son, William Keppel Lord Viscount Barrington (6<sup>th</sup>). Also, the size of the farm may have been increased around this period. The sale in 1799 shown above, clearly states that the farm amounted to 127 acres,

and yet by 1917, it was 283 acres. When this happened is unknown, but it's possible that when it was purchased by the Beckett Estate, other land was bought with it.



A newspaper article in 1847 carried the story of a barn at Sandhill Farm that had been struck by lightning and set on fire, and this carried the information that Mr Hewer was the occupier. (Bath Chronicle 23<sup>rd</sup> Sept 1847). The census of 1851 showed that Jane Hewer was the head of the household at the Farm. Her husband Joseph had died a year previously and was buried at St Andrew's churchyard on 28<sup>th</sup> February 1850, aged 72. The electoral system in that period was different from today in that tenant farmers were included among those eligible to vote. At the court session convened at Faringdon in October 1862, Robert and George Hewer stated that they rented the farm jointly for £520 per annum

and that up until Christmas 1857 the farm was in their mother's name and thereafter placed in their names. (Reading Mercury 4<sup>th</sup> October 1862) The census of 1861 confirmed that situation and Robert and George were listed aged 30 and 28. But by 1871 the census showed that Robert had left the farm and was renting a cottage in Highworth and George had taken over the running of Sandhill. In 1873 and 1874, the newspaper reported George selling animal stock and implements. (Oxford Journal 13<sup>th</sup> Sept 1873 and North Wilts Herald 21<sup>st</sup> February 1874) From the summer of 1876, Robert was selling crop, animals and implements. (Swindon Adver 24<sup>th</sup> July 1876 and 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1876). The census of 1881 showed that George had moved down the hill half a mile to Stallpits Farm and Robert in a freehold house at Highworth.

Next running Sandhill Farm was Edwin Hiscock, aged 37, with his wife Mary Martha, aged 28 and his two sons and a daughter. He was still there in 1891 but had added another two daughters to his family. The Kelly's Directory for 1895 listed Edwin but by the next census of 1911, he seemed to have left farming and was living in Lorne Street, Reading with his wife and two of his children. At the farm in 1901 was listed John Snook, aged 65 with his wife Martha, aged 64 and four children. But just before the census of April 1911, the head of the household, John Snook died aged 76 and was buried in St Andrew's churchyard, Shrivenham on 21<sup>st</sup> January. (Below - Snook family stone). The Snook family photograph shown below is from the former RMCS Library. It is assumed that the senior man shown is John Snook which helps to date the image to circa 1910 or earlier. Upon his father's death, George Harvey Snook took over as head of the farm, aged 28.





A newspaper advertisement in 1917 described George Snook selling off his herd of young milking dairy cows. (North Wilts Herald 16<sup>th</sup> Feb 1917) The advert explained that it was purely because of the lack of milkers that he had decided to sell the herd, presumably to take advantage of the high prices that they would attract because of the shortage. It may also have been for another reason. George could have been tipped off that the Barrington Estate was to be sold and the farms were to be auctioned first. Sandhill Farm became Lot 1 in the sale catalogue. At the auction that took place at the Goddard Arms in Old Town, Swindon on 24<sup>th</sup> September 1917, a newspaper reporter noted that the farm, '*aroused considerable competition.*' However, the reserve price was not reached, and it remained unsold. (Faringdon Adver 29<sup>th</sup> Sept 1917) George seems to have made an agreement with Lord Barrington's agents, as he did manage to purchase the farm. The reason this is known is because on 27<sup>th</sup> June 1932 the farm was sold on account of George being made bankrupt. The mortgagees had forced the sale to recover their money (North Wilts Herald 27<sup>th</sup> May 1932). A subsequent newspaper article reported on the sale and described that the farm was sold to a Mr J.T. Diment of Ham Court, Bampton, Oxon for £5700. He also purchased the cottages and accommodation land that was offered with the sale. (North Wilts Herald 1<sup>st</sup> July 1932)

An incident that occurred four years later was noted in the newspaper. Local policeman, P.C. Giles, had discovered 16 head of cattle wandering about and obstructing the public road. It was Robert B. Diment who ended up in court and was fined 10 shillings. He blamed the two local hunts who had been over his land and had caused considerable damage. (North Wilts Herald 24<sup>th</sup> April 1936) In October 1936, Robert Diment and his wife left Sandhill Farm and moved to Park Farm, Newton St Loe, Somerset. This information comes from a long and detailed newspaper article concerning Robert's alleged affair with a woman from Bath, and his wife hiring agents to keep surveillance on him. (Bath Chronicle 4<sup>th</sup> December 1937) However, it seems that it wasn't the end of the Diments at Sandhill Farm. The Electoral Register for 1958-9 listed that James J.T. Diment was still there as well as Doris M. Diment and a lady called Ruth Hall.

Currently (2021) the farm is owned by Robert Gay who purchased it in the early 1970s. He is well-known within the community and has taken an active part in village affairs. We thank him for allowing us to photograph the farm buildings. (Below). A Lidar image of the farm showing considerable earlier activity.

If you have any further information to add to the history of the farm, please contact us on:

[info@shrivenhamheritagesociety.co.uk](mailto:info@shrivenhamheritagesociety.co.uk)

